The Scottish Gaelic Propositional Cleft

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This dissertation examines the syntax and pragmatics of a hitherto undiscussed and unanalyzed wide-scope contrastive focus construction in Scottish Gaelic which I call the *Propositional Cleft*. The Propositional cleft presents two puzzles: a pragmatic one and a morphosyntactic one. Contrastive focus on an entire proposition is typologically rare (possibly unique to Scottish Gaelic), and the puzzle is how this focus is possible without a division into focus and background. The propositional cleft utilizes all the regular cleft morphosyntax—the copula, a *pro*-form expletive (the ‘augment’), and the relative complementizer. In regular clefts the use of the relative complementizer is unsurprising: there is a clear A-bar dependency between the clefted constituent and a gap inside the relative clause. In the propositional cleft, however, there is no (overt) clefted constituent, and no apparent gap inside the relative clause: the relative clause appears to express a whole proposition. This is surprising in a language which otherwise very clearly and consistently marks clauses which contain A-bar dependencies versus clauses which do not.

The insight is that focus on the proposition is necessarily different from narrow focus, where focus is on a subpart of the proposition. In narrow-focus utterances, the proposition is divided into focus and background. Broad-scope utterances, however, lack this focal structure because wide scope operates at the discourse level, focusing the proposition against a background set of accepted propositions (the Common Ground in Roberts’s (1996) Question under Discussion (QUD) framework). The contrastive function of the PC is to REVISE the current QUD: it rejects a proposed or salient proposition (along with the QUD it presupposes) and substitutes its own propositional content into the common ground.

I derive this from the syntax by showing that the relative clause of the PC—which contains the propositional content of the utterance—occupies an adjoined position which is independently associated with given information. Content in this position presupposes the QUD. In the PC no QUD can be presupposed because this position is occupied by new propositional content. The manipulation of this syntax-to-information structure mapping allows the speaker to access the common ground without answering a QUD. The PC has the same bipartite structure that regular clefts have. In the PC, however, this bipartite structure is not obvious because the element in the clefted position is null (I identify this element as Percus’s (2000) situation variable). Scottish Gaelic has the means to abstract over this element, which I tie to the properties of A-bar dependencies in the language generally.

The PC contributes to our understanding of focus, which has been primarily informed by narrow-focus utterances. The broad scope contrastive focus conveyed by the PC demands an expansion of the notion of focus beyond the sentence level, and supports the independence of focus from a syntactic position or feature. The analysis presented here also supports a view of the syntax-pragmatics interface where certain syntactic positions are associated with certain information structural notions, and where this mapping may be manipulated by the speaker.